



# Pastor's Update

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LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

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*"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."* (Phil. 1:2).

For many years I was a part of a luncheon group which included senior pastors of some very large congregations in the Twin Cities. What I enjoyed most about this group was that we were from a wide variety of backgrounds and denominations, including Baptist, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, UCC and non-denominational. I was the token Lutheran.

One of the pastors in the group was Leith Anderson, pastor of Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, a large and rapidly growing congregation. By way of background the congregation used to be called Wooddale Baptist when it was located in Richfield, but when it moved to Eden Prairie it decided to drop the name 'Baptist.' The reason given was that a marketing study showed that people were more willing to join a Community Church than a Baptist Church. The operating principle was as follows: "If your name helps your mission, keep it, if it hurts your mission, change it."

I digress. Christianity Today in a recent issue asks a very contemporary question, Is American getting better or worse, is the nation becoming more spiritual or more secular, is the church getting stronger or becoming more marginalized. According to the introduction, many conservative evangelical intellectuals have concluded that America is "definitely and irreversibly anti-God."

Therefore in response to this question, the magazine decided to feature two articles from very different viewpoints. The first is written by one of the pessimistic evangelical theologians, a retired professor, who has basically given up on America. (I am always curious to find that so many people who think this way are older, is there something about advancing age which causes people to think the nation's best years are behind it, who seem to pine for the good old days of yesteryear.)

The other side of the coin, however, is written by my friend Leith Anderson, who is introduced as being "one of the most respected pastors and leaders in American, having served Wooddale for more than 25 years, also serving as interim president of Denver Seminary and the National Association of Evangelicals. His most recent book (which is excellent) is entitled Leadership That Works: Hope and Direction for the Church in Today's Complex World. (One of his basic assertions is that the church

today is far more complex than a generation ago, demanding much more sophisticated leadership.)

I would like to quote selectively from Leith's article about the hopeful signs he sees today for the Gospel and the Christian church:

*"I spoke at a convention recently where, after one of my sessions, a woman raised her hand and asked, 'If the gospel and the church are supposed to be so effective, why is everything in America so bad?' What she was saying, basically, is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ doesn't work. And perhaps the reason she assumes failure is because she has heard that message so often from our pulpits, our broadcasts, and our publications. The Gospel might have worked someplace else. It might have worked at another time. But we are repeatedly told that the Gospel doesn't work anymore; we hear things are getting far worse.*

*So how bad are things in the U.S.? Indeed, we live in difficult times. Not one of us needs to look very far to see the effects of sin. We have corporate corruption, pornography, abortions, divorces, anemic churches, five million couples living together who are not married; clergy immorality, drug abuse and more.*

*But that isn't anything new, is it? In the history of America, the roots of deism and secularism go back a long way. Books like Undaunted Courage about the Lewis and Clark expedition and Theodore Rex the biography of Theodore Roosevelt, remind us of the appalling immorality, drug abuse and business and political corruption that permeated generations 100 or 200 years ago. So things have been bad and continue to be bad, in lots of ways.*

*But remember the kinds of influences that Christians are having on our country. One hundred and fifty years ago slavery became illegal in America when abolitionist Christians put their lives on the line for human freedom. One hundred years ago in America, opium and morphine use was so pervasive that it produced an unprecedented number of addicts. Fifty years ago theological liberalism so dominated the religious landscape that "born-again" Christians were clearly on the reins of society.*

*Today, however, those who publicly state that they are born again Christians include the President of the United States, many of his cabinet, governors of many states, members of Congress, CEO's of our largest corporations, university professors, best selling authors like John Grisham, country music stars like Randy Travis, professional athletes, etc.*

*New York City had a reputation a generation ago for being one of the dirtiest and most unsafe cities in the world (think Times Square), today it has one of the lowest crime rates in the nation. More than three-quarters of Americans describe themselves as Christians. Congregations where the Bible is taught and holiness is lived are multiplying and flourishing. (See Update, July 23, 2004). The largest and most effective churches in America, almost without exception, have a serious commitment to the truth of the Bible and the authority of Jesus Christ.*

*There are fewer R-rated films produced now than there were 10 years ago. And one of them most successful R-rated films was the Passion of the Christ. The best selling books in America and around the world have included in recent years The Prayer of Jabez, Left Behind, and the Purpose Driven Life.*

*I remember when pornography magazines were sold in 7-Eleven and other convenience stores. I don't recommend you go looking for them but you will have difficulty finding them readily in those stores today. The New York Times recently editorialized that evangelical Christians in America are shaping U.S. foreign policy toward righteousness.*

*And so it goes. Christians are leading holy lives that are having an enormous impact within our society. Some Christian leaders say that Christianity in America is, in fact, 3000 miles wide and one inch thick. As someone who travels a great deal in this country and interacts with Christians, I simply say that is not my experience.*

*One way to test the theory is to take out the sharp knife of tragedy and cut deep to see what is under an inch of American Christianity. I remember the tragedy at Columbine High School, the sniper tragedies in Washington D.C. and September 11<sup>th</sup>, and how it produced more testimonies to Jesus Christ than anything I can remember in recent times. So I am awed, I'm impressed by Christians in America, who, in facing unexpected tragedies, turn to God." Thus says Leith Anderson.*

I believe that the prevailing sentiments of Lutheran Church of Hope would certainly concur with this article. We truly wish to become our name, to be people of hope, to have an optimistic and forward-looking vision. We see powerful evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit, we celebrate the deep and abiding faith in Jesus Christ which characterizes this congregation.

We are thrilled with the overwhelming response and growth which has resulted from faithfulness to Scripture and the Christ who is revealed in the Word. We rejoice with the enthusiasm and the passion which people at Hope worship and praise God.

Of course we realize as much as anyone that our task is not yet complete, the world is still attracted to all kinds of false gods and empty promises. But we believe that God is working for good in all things and continues to amaze us with grace and love and power. We are people who have a theology of abundance rather than scarcity, believing that God who began a good work in us will complete it at the day of Jesus Christ.

In summary, to spend much time pining for the good old days (which were most likely not all that good, at least not for everyone) is a huge waste of time and energy. Rather we need to discern where God is at work today and become a part of his mission. As in the miracle of changing the water into wine, we find that the best wine sometimes comes later, the best is yet to come. That is our hope, the best is ahead of us, for Christians, for the church, for the world.